Walking with Robert Burns: memory, meter, composition, recitation

By Thomas Fox Averill

On a Burns Night several years ago, a poet friend Eric recited, from memory, ‘To a Mouse, On Turning Her Up In Her Nest, With The Plough, November 1785’, a poem of forty-eight lines. Our gathering was impressed. A spoken poem is immediate, real, genuine. I must admit, I was jealous. At the time, I knew several Burns poems by heart – ‘A Red, Red Rose’, ‘The Henpecked Husband’, ‘To Miss Ainslie in Church’, ‘Robert Bruce’s March To Bannockburn’ (or ‘Scots Wha Hae’) – but they were short, and not even my very favourites.

I determined to be impressive myself the following year: I would memorize ‘Tam O’ Shanter’ (228 lines in the original ‘lawyers and priests’ version). Full of Scottish folklore, this narrative poem tells the tale of hapless Tam as he overstays market day, and, fully inebriated, witnesses a witch’s sabbath. Chased by demons, he and his loyal mare Maggie ‘win’ the keystone of the Brig O’ Doon, and, as spirits cannot cross a running stream, they escape, but not without a bit of damage to the horse: ‘The carlin claught her by the rump / And left poor Maggie scarce a stump.’

I walk every morning, at least a mile by myself before my wife joins me, so I began to tuck away a few lines of ‘Tam’ each day. I may have looked a bit strange to those in my neighborhood: a man looking at his phone (I consult the website Burns Country), muttering to himself, checking his phone and muttering again, line after line, two at a time, because ‘Tam’ is written in couplets. The poem is iambic tetrameter, so step by step, stress by stress, the poem weds meter to stride:

> *When CHAPman BILLies LEAVE the STREET,*
>
> *And DROUThy NEIbors, NEIbors, MEET;*

> *As MARket DAYS are WEARing LATE,*
>
> *And FOLK beGIN to TAK the GATE.*

When I coupled my morning exercise with memorization, I did not know that Burns himself often composed outdoors, in the countryside of Alloway and Ayr. About ‘Tam O’ Shanter’, Allan Cunningham writes in *The Complete Works of Robert Burns* (1860):

> *This poem was the work of a single day: Burns walked out to his favourite musing path, which runs towards the old tower of the Isle, along Nithside, and was observed to walk hastily and mutter as he went. His wife knew by these signs that he was engaged in composition, and watched him from the window; at last wearying, and moreover wondering at the unusual length of his meditations, she took her children with her and went to meet him; but as he seemed not to see her, she stept aside among the broom to allow him to pass, which he did with a flushed brow and dropping eyes, reciting these lines aloud:—*
> *‘Now Tam! O, Tam! had thae been queans, A’ plump and strapping in their teens! Their sarks, instead o’ creeshie flannen, Been snaw-white seventeen hunder linen!’*

Burns was sounding out lines 155–58 of his composition, with seventy more lines to complete the poem. Some question Cunningham’s claim that ‘Tam’ was composed in a day. Burns wrote to a Mrs Dunlop on 11 April 1791, that his poem shows ‘[…] a force of genius and a finishing polish that I despair of ever excelling’. So, he must have edited and refined.

That debate aside, I know that memorizing ‘Tam’ is not the task of a single day. I began in late January 2019. In twenty to thirty minutes, I might be lucky to pack away two or three couplets, and then the next morning relearn them toward permanence. Months later, on a walk with my daughter Eleanor, I recited the entire poem for the first time to that audience of one. She appreciated a walking recitation, as she’s a dancer, whose art is conceived in both mind and body, and expressed physically. In late May I winged my way through it again (‘As bees flee hame wi’ lades o’ treasure, / The minutes wing’d their way wi’ pleasure’), this time for more of my family during an arts residency at Whiterock Conservancy in

Iowa. I had another chance on an August trip to Austin to visit our nephew, the lamps low, a wee dram of whisky in hand.

I was ready to be impressive at our next Burns Night (on or close to 25 January) with family and friends. But in January 2020, my wife and I traveled to Thailand to visit our son and his girlfriend (now fiancée), who were teaching English at a university in Thailand. So, our Burns Night was the four of us in an Airbnb in Chiang Mai, with a poem from 1790 recited 8500 miles from home. By March 2020, we were slammed into the COVID lockdown that would cancel Burns Night 2021.

Circumstances have stolen my opportunity to show off 'Tam' at a family Burns Night, but the process of packing my brain with Burns became a ritual, a kind of habitual meditation. I increased my repertoire, starting with the Burns poems my father often read at the dinner table: 'To A Mouse', 'To A Louse', and 'A Man's A Man For A That'. Then I added some of my favourites: 'A Poet's Welcome To His Love-Begotten Daughter', 'Address To A Haggis', and 'John Barleycorn'. At this writing, I have thirty-one poems, long ('Cotter's Saturday Night') and short ('Epigram to Rough Roads'), in my head.

Memorized poetry, like all that we know by heart, is portable, whether around the block or abroad. It is etched in the brain, talking the talk and walking the walk. Patricia, another of my poet-friends, happens to be distantly related to Robert Burns. She writes of:

> *[…] feeling a poem-in-process bodily, in the limbs, in the rhythms of breath, walking out the lines in a way that illustrates their strengths and weaknesses, until the day arrives when the walking seems to have brought the … incipient poem into fruition, into being. … Though I rarely write formal verse, there is always a living pulse to find in each poem, and that pulse merges with the poet's own heartbeat, the rhythm of the limbs as s/he moves through a day.*

My dancer daughter Ellie writes similarly of her choreography: 'an internal rhythm develops even without music and even without a formal meter'.

As for me, on my walks with Burns, I'm not simply remembering words, lines, poems –I'm embodying them. A poem is fully committed to memory when I don't have to remember it at all. I don't *think about* the next line, I simply say it aloud. I recite ‘Tam O’ Shanter’ aloud on a walk even while thinking about something else.

No wonder, then, that given my method of memorization, I find it fitting, and companionable, that Burns so often composed in the portable mode, walking, ploughing, or riding horseback. According to the Scottish Poetry Library, Burns ‘was blessed with an amazingly retentive memory’ and he had little ‘time to sit and ponder poems’, so he often composed while at his farming and other work.

In a September 1793 letter to publisher George Thomson, Burns writes about his process of composing poems based on music. Of ‘Lassie Lie Near Me’, which in 1789 he had sent, unsigned, to James Johnson for inclusion in the *Scots Musical Museum*:

> *My way is: I consider the poetic sentiment correspondent to my idea of the musical expression; then choose my theme; begin one stanza: when that is composed, which is generally the most difficult part of the business, I walk out, sit down now and then, look out for objects of nature around me that are in unison and harmony with the cogitations of my fancy, and workings of my bosom; humming every now and then the air with the verses I have framed. When I feel my muse beginning to jade, I retire to the solitary fire-side of my study, and there commit my effusions to paper; swinging at intervals on the hind-legs of my elbow-chair, by way of calling forth my own critical strictures as my pen goes on.*

In a similar way, Burns composed ‘Saw Ye Bonnie Lesley’. He writes to Mrs Dunlop on 22 August 1792:

> *Mr. B. with his two daughters, accompanied by Mr. H. of G. passing through Dumfries a few days ago, on their way to England, did me the honour of calling on me; on which I took my horse (though God knows I could ill spare the time), and accompanied them fourteen or fifteen miles, and dined and spent the day with them. ’Twas about nine, I think, when I left them, and riding home, composed the following ballad …*

Besides the poems composed walking, or on horseback, there are those occasional poems written because of experiences out of doors. ‘To A Mouse’ was conceived, according to Cunningham, ‘while the poet was holding the plough, on the farm of Mossgiel’. The mouse was turned up, and Burns’s *gaudsman* (a boy who accompanies the ploughman, inciting and directing the plough animals with his *gaud* – pointed rod or stick) chased after it. That night, Burns woke the boy and recited the poem in its entirety, saying, ‘What think you of our mouse now?’ That *gaudsman*, Blane, Allan Cunningham writes, tells the story and notes that the Mossgiel field ‘is still pointed out’. This association of poem with place makes geography a part of the lore of the poem.

Geography/place can not only inspire the subject, and then the meaning of a poem, but can influence mood, as well. Michael Burch writes of Burns:

> *To walk by a river while flooded, or through a wood on a rough winter day, and hear the storm howling among the leafless trees, exalted the poet’s thoughts. ‘In such a season,’ [Burns] said, ‘just after a train of misfortunes, I composed Winter, a Dirge.’*

Some lines, from 1781:

> *The sweeping blast, the sky o’ercast,*
>
> *The joyless winter day*
>
> *Let others fear, to me more dear*
>
> *Than all the pride of May:*
>
> *The tempest’s howl, it soothes my soul,*
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> *My griefs it seems to join;*
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> *The leafless trees my fancy please,*
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> *Their fate resembles mine!*

This physical interaction between the natural world and the poet, and the immediate creation of verse, seems a pattern in Burns: verse distils experience and the poem becomes a memorial to feeling and event.

Those memorial places ‘still pointed out’ are also sought out. When my grandmother visited the Golden Lion Inn at Stirling, she copied in her travel journal the words on a plaque that touts a poem once etched in glass by Burns: ‘Written By Somebody On The Window Of An Inn At Stirling, On Seeing The Royal Palace In Ruin.’ The poet later returned to the hotel (then Wingatte’s Inn) to smash the window, and thus the poem. His characterization of the British – ‘The injur’d Stewart line are gone, / A race outlandish fill their throne: / An idiot race, to honour lost – / Who know them best despise them most’ – put him in danger of losing the excise position he was angling for. Burns shattered the window, but the poem lives in that place, and in my grandmother’s experience of that place. And, because it’s in my repertoire, it lives in my experience and memory. Interestingly, Burns used his diamond point pen to etch poems on over twenty windowpanes, and on goblets and drinking glasses. He also signed his name on a window in the room in Dumfries where he died. So, besides places, objects became memorials to Burns and his poetry. Poems written with a diamond on glass would also have to be well embedded in Burns’s memory – when etching on glass, there can be no rough drafts.

If Burns composed a good deal outdoors, walking and working and riding, then the pace and meter of those activities must have influenced his work. Movement creates rhythm and cadence as surely as poetry does. When such movement becomes overt in the poem, in the words and lines, the poem is perfect for memorizing on foot. As I walk, Burns’s metric feet move into my walking feet. Repeated phrasing, just as repeated work like ploughing, must also have helped Burns compose and remember. The first four lines of ‘Ae Fond Kiss’ become the last four lines. The last six lines of the first stanza complete the rhyme with the same word:

Ae fond kiss, and then we sever;
Ae fareweel, alas, for ever!
Deep in heart-wrung tears I’ll pledge thee,
Warring sighs and groans I’ll wage thee.
Who shall say that Fortune grieves him,
While the star of hope she leaves him?
Me, nae cheerful twinkle lights me;
Dark despair around benights me.

‘Banks O’ Doon’ has similar devices, and both poems were among the over three hundred pieces Robert Burns helped to shape for James Johnson’s *The Scots Musical Museum* (six volumes, 1787–1803) and for George Thomson’s *A Select Collection of Original Scottish Airs for the Voice* (five volumes, 1793–1818). The tunes and much of the language were in the oral tradition. The Poetry Foundation website notes that when Burns first arrived in Edinburgh in 1786, during a ‘heyday of cultural nationalism’, he and his poetry were seen as ‘evidences of a Scottish culture’. He was proof of noble peasanty, close to nature, his poetry echoing the best of written, and especially oral, Scottish literature.

The poet’s strong connection to the oral tradition must have contributed to his prodigious memory, since that tradition is based in performance and not publication. I was a public-school student during a time when memorization was still part of studying literature. ‘By the shores of Gitchee Gumee, / By the shining Big-Sea-Water/ Stood the wigwam …’ we recited. No matter Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s appropriation of Native American culture, ‘The Song of Hiawatha’ is about learning the language ‘of all beasts’ and the creation stories of the moon and the rainbow, the oral traditions of his tribe. Burns never hesitated to borrow or refashion lines from his own folk traditions. Allan Cunningham introduces Burns’s ‘Auld Lang Syne’ with this note:

> *‘Is not the Scotch phrase,’ Burns writes to Mrs. Dunlop, ‘Auld lang syne, exceedingly expressive?’ There is an old song and tune which has often thrilled through my soul: I shall give you the verses on the other sheet. Light be the turf on the breast of the heaven-inspired poet who composed this glorious fragment. […] ‘The following song,’ says the poet, when he communicated it to George Thomson, ‘an old song of the olden times, and which has never been in print, nor even in manuscript, until I took it down from an old man’s singing, is enough to recommend any air.’ These are strong words, but there can be no doubt that, save for a line or two, we owe the song to no other minstrel than ‘minstrel Burns.’*

Regarding ‘Tam O’ Shanter’, Burns credits Betty Davidson, a relative of his mother:

> *In my infant and boyish days too, I owed much to an old Maid of my Mother’s, remarkable for her ignorance, credulity and superstition. She had, I suppose,*

> *the largest collection in the county of tales and songs concerning devils, ghosts, fairies, brownies, witches, warlocks, spunkies, kelpies, elf-candles, dead-lights, wraiths, apparitions, cantraips, giants, inchanted towers, dragons and other trumpery.*

If Burns already knew the stories, the images, the language, that would help him create 'Tam', some from the oral tradition of Betty Davidson, some from local folklore, including the farmer's horse with no tail, then he could well have composed the poem, or the gist of it, in a single day. I used to recite it every day, and in under fifteen minutes, knowing where I would be in the poem by where I was in my mile-long walk. Burns notes Tam's progress on his journey home with the line 'By this time he was cross the ford'. When I say that line, if I've started the poem as I leave my house in Topeka, Kansas, I'll be about five or six blocks into my walk, so for me it's 'By this time I was cross Kendall on Third'. By Meadows Elementary school, in the circle drive, I'm seeing 'An unco' sight. / Warlocks and witches in a dance'. Landmarks in the poem match the physical markers of my regular walking route. In the same way, I know how long, in time and distance, it will take me to recite a particular poem to myself, so if I'm close to home I often choose a poem I can finish as I climb my first porch stair.

Memorizing a poem is one thing; keeping it in mind is another. Two years of daily practice may be more than necessary for recall, but I persist. I cycle through the thirty-one poems in three walking days of a half hour or so each. When I chose the poems to commit to memory, I wanted at least one poem for every year Burns wrote. Then I added more. 'Ae Fond Kiss' and 'Banks O' Doon' are from 1791, as are 'Sic A Parcel Of Rogues In A Nation' and 'What Can A Young Lassie Do With An Old Man'. I often recite the poems chronologically. Sometimes I'll just say the 'habbies' I've committed to memory: 'A Poet's Welcome to His Love-Begotten Daughter', 'Holy Willie's Prayer', 'To A Mouse', 'Address to a Haggis', and 'To a Louse'. Habbies, with six-line stanzas, have a walker's rhythm, the first three lines of rhyming iambic tetrameter followed by a short iambic dimeter, followed by another tetrameter, and ending with a dimeter that rhymes with the one before. Burns uses the pithy dimeters for humour or combat. This stanza from 'A Poet's Welcome To His Love-Begotten Daughter' ends with a nice punch:

> *Wee image o' my bonie Betty,*

As fatherly I kiss and daut thee,

As dear, and near my heart I set thee

Wi' as gude will

As a' the priests had seen me get thee

That's out o' hell.

'Tam O' Shanter' still takes most of a walk. As does 'The Cotter's Saturday Night', the longest Burns poem I've memorized.

I could keep the poems in my head without performing them daily, but the recitation has become my practice because it calms me, focuses my energy, and makes the exercise more pleasurable. Most important, the poetry occupies and tames my monkey brain, prone as I am to anxiety and worry and rumination. In short, the poetry has kept me grounded, and especially so during the isolation and uncertainty of these pandemic years.

I also use the poetry to help me fall asleep. During a slow recitation of 'Holy Willie's Prayer', one syllable per heartbeat, I will drift off somewhere after his praises to God and himself, and before his hypocritical confessions. I suppose I'm counting lines rather than sheep, until I lose my focus, drift, and let go. Thus, I move from poetry to dream.

So I fall asleep to Robert Burns, and wake for a morning walk with Robert Burns, who no doubt did the same with his poetry. I feel more connected to Burns with the poems committed to memory than I would if I read them each day. Perhaps this is like the difference between prayer and scripture – one you say and the other you read on the page. As I started my project with the memorization of 'Tam O' Shanter', I was feeling competitive with my poet friend Eric and his 'To A Mouse'. I'm no longer competitive, but thankful, because he brought me to a new practice, a deeper understanding. In conversation about committing poems to memory, he said, 'A memorized poem is the easiest art to smuggle and the hardest to steal'. I've smuggled thirty-one poems into my head, and nobody can steal them. Or maybe the poems are not only in my head. As my Burns-related friend Patricia wrote, 'No matter how long ago a poem was composed or how long its author has not been alive in our world, that poem will find its place in our pulse as we read it, as we walk out its rhythms with our own limbs.’

I may appear to be the muttering man striding the sidewalks of my morning mile one poetic foot at a time, checking my phone, occasionally singing. But that’s my practice, so that I might come to inhabit and embody the poems and the poet. Transcending the worry, the pain, the woe of daily drudgery, I walk with Robert Burns in his Ayr and my Topeka, in his 1700s and my 2000s, in his beating heart and my own.On a Burns Night several years ago, a poet friend Eric recited, from memory, ‘To a Mouse, On Turning Her Up In Her Nest, With The Plough, November 1785’, a poem of forty-eight lines. Our gathering was impressed. A spoken poem is immediate, real, genuine. I must admit, I was jealous. At the time, I knew several Burns poems by heart – ‘A Red, Red Rose’, ‘The Henpecked Husband’, ‘To Miss Ainslie in Church’, ‘Robert Bruce’s March To Bannockburn’ (or ‘Scots Wha Hae’) – but they were short, and not even my very favourites.

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When I coupled my morning exercise with memorization, I did not know that Burns himself often composed outdoors, in the countryside of Alloway and Ayr. About ‘Tam O’ Shanter’, Allan Cunningham writes in *The Complete Works of Robert Burns* (1860):

> *This poem was the work of a single day: Burns walked out to his favourite musing path, which runs towards the old tower of the Isle, along Nithside, and was observed to walk hastily and mutter as he went. His wife knew by these signs that he was engaged in composition, and watched him from the window; at last wearying, and moreover wondering at the unusual length of his meditations, she took her children with her and went to meet him; but as he seemed not to see her, she stept aside among the broom to allow him to pass, which he did with a flushed brow and dropping eyes, reciting these lines aloud:—*
> *‘Now Tam! O, Tam! had thae been queans, A’ plump and strapping in their teens! Their sarks, instead o’ creeshie flannen, Been snaw-white seventeen hunder linen!’*

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‘Banks O’ Doon’ has similar devices, and both poems were among the over three hundred pieces Robert Burns helped to shape for James Johnson’s *The Scots Musical Museum* (six volumes, 1787–1803) and for George Thomson’s *A Select*

Collection of Original Scottish Airs for the Voice (five volumes, 1793–1818). The tunes and much of the language were in the oral tradition. The Poetry Foundation website notes that when Burns first arrived in Edinburgh in 1786, during a 'heyday of cultural nationalism', he and his poetry were seen as 'evidences of a Scottish culture'. He was proof of noble peasanty, close to nature, his poetry echoing the best of written, and especially oral, Scottish literature.

The poet's strong connection to the oral tradition must have contributed to his prodigious memory, since that tradition is based in performance and not publication. I was a public-school student during a time when memorization was still part of studying literature. 'By the shores of Gitchee Gumee, / By the shining Big-Sea-Water/ Stood the wigwam …' we recited. No matter Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's appropriation of Native American culture, 'The Song of Hiawatha' is about learning the language 'of all beasts' and the creation stories of the moon and the rainbow, the oral traditions of his tribe. Burns never hesitated to borrow or refashion lines from his own folk traditions. Allan Cunningham introduces Burns's 'Auld Lang Syne' with this note:

> *'Is not the Scotch phrase,' Burns writes to Mrs. Dunlop, 'Auld lang syne, exceedingly expressive?' There is an old song and tune which has often thrilled through my soul: I shall give you the verses on the other sheet. Light be the turf on the breast of the heaven-inspired poet who composed this glorious fragment. […] 'The following song,' says the poet, when he communicated it to George Thomson, 'an old song of the olden times, and which has never been in print, nor even in manuscript, until I took it down from an old man's singing, is enough to recommend any air.' These are strong words, but there can be no doubt that, save for a line or two, we owe the song to no other minstrel than 'minstrel Burns.'*

Regarding 'Tam O' Shanter', Burns credits Betty Davidson, a relative of his mother:

> *In my infant and boyish days too, I owed much to an old Maid of my Mother's, remarkable for her ignorance, credulity and superstition. She had, I suppose, the largest collection in the county of tales and songs concerning devils, ghosts, fairies, brownies, witches, warlocks, spunkies, kelpies, elf-candles, dead-lights, wraiths, apparitions, cantraips, giants, inchanted towers, dragons and other*

> *trumpery.*

If Burns already knew the stories, the images, the language, that would help him create ‘Tam’, some from the oral tradition of Betty Davidson, some from local folklore, including the farmer’s horse with no tail, then he could well have composed the poem, or the gist of it, in a single day. I used to recite it every day, and in under fifteen minutes, knowing where I would be in the poem by where I was in my mile-long walk. Burns notes Tam’s progress on his journey home with the line ‘By this time he was cross the ford’. When I say that line, if I’ve started the poem as I leave my house in Topeka, Kansas, I’ll be about five or six blocks into my walk, so for me it’s ‘By this time I was cross Kendall on Third’. By Meadows Elementary school, in the circle drive, I’m seeing ‘An unco’ sight. / Warlocks and witches in a dance’. Landmarks in the poem match the physical markers of my regular walking route. In the same way, I know how long, in time and distance, it will take me to recite a particular poem to myself, so if I’m close to home I often choose a poem I can finish as I climb my first porch stair.

Memorizing a poem is one thing; keeping it in mind is another. Two years of daily practice may be more than necessary for recall, but I persist. I cycle through the thirty-one poems in three walking days of a half hour or so each. When I chose the poems to commit to memory, I wanted at least one poem for every year Burns wrote. Then I added more. ‘Ae Fond Kiss’ and ‘Banks O’ Doon’ are from 1791, as are ‘Sic A Parcel Of Rogues In A Nation’ and ‘What Can A Young Lassie Do With An Old Man’. I often recite the poems chronologically. Sometimes I’ll just say the ‘habbies’ I’ve committed to memory: ‘A Poet’s Welcome to His Love-Begotten Daughter’, ‘Holy Willie’s Prayer’, ‘To A Mouse’, ‘Address to a Haggis’, and ‘To a Louse’. Habbies, with six-line stanzas, have a walker’s rhythm, the first three lines of rhyming iambic tetrameter followed by a short iambic dimeter, followed by another tetrameter, and ending with a dimeter that rhymes with the one before. Burns uses the pithy dimeters for humour or combat. This stanza from ‘A Poet’s Welcome To His Love-Begotten Daughter’ ends with a nice punch:

> *Wee image o’ my bonie Betty,*
>
> *As fatherly I kiss and daut thee,*
>
> *As dear, and near my heart I set thee*

Wi' as gude will

As a' the priests had seen me get thee

That's out o' hell.

'Tam O' Shanter' still takes most of a walk. As does 'The Cotter's Saturday Night', the longest Burns poem I've memorized.

I could keep the poems in my head without performing them daily, but the recitation has become my practice because it calms me, focuses my energy, and makes the exercise more pleasurable. Most important, the poetry occupies and tames my monkey brain, prone as I am to anxiety and worry and rumination. In short, the poetry has kept me grounded, and especially so during the isolation and uncertainty of these pandemic years.

I also use the poetry to help me fall asleep. During a slow recitation of 'Holy Willie's Prayer', one syllable per heartbeat, I will drift off somewhere after his praises to God and himself, and before his hypocritical confessions. I suppose I'm counting lines rather than sheep, until I lose my focus, drift, and let go. Thus, I move from poetry to dream.

So I fall asleep to Robert Burns, and wake for a morning walk with Robert Burns, who no doubt did the same with his poetry. I feel more connected to Burns with the poems committed to memory than I would if I read them each day. Perhaps this is like the difference between prayer and scripture – one you say and the other you read on the page. As I started my project with the memorization of 'Tam O' Shanter', I was feeling competitive with my poet friend Eric and his 'To A Mouse'. I'm no longer competitive, but thankful, because he brought me to a new practice, a deeper understanding. In conversation about committing poems to memory, he said, 'A memorized poem is the easiest art to smuggle and the hardest to steal'. I've smuggled thirty-one poems into my head, and nobody can steal them. Or maybe the poems are not only in my head. As my Burns-related friend Patricia wrote, 'No matter how long ago a poem was composed or how long its author has not been alive in our world, that poem will find its place in our pulse as we read it, as we walk out its rhythms with our own limbs.'

I may appear to be the muttering man striding the sidewalks of my morning mile one poetic foot at a time, checking my phone, occasionally singing. But that’s my practice, so that I might come to inhabit and embody the poems and the poet. Transcending the worry, the pain, the woe of daily drudgery, I walk with Robert Burns in his Ayr and my Topeka, in his 1700s and my 2000s, in his beating heart and my own.

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